

# M an: a military working dog's best friend

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"I love dogs!"

No matter which handler with the 377th Security Forces Squadron's Military Working Dogs Unit you ask about their career choice, those three words, like a mantra, are their first comments.

During a recent visit to the kennels, Staff Sgt. John Helms and Senior Airman Garrett Pape prefaced their remarks the same and their eyes grew lively speaking about their work and the dogs in their care.

The men and women in the military canine units express deep commitment and love of their work and love for their canine partners in whom they place trust for their very lives in the line of duty.

"I wanted to do this from day one (in the military)," Helms added.

"Ever since I came to the military," said Pape, "I always wanted to be a cop and love working with dogs."

"I have a blast," he adds. "I have the greatest job in the world. I go to work and play with a dog."

Pape's canine partner is Ricky, a five-year-old German shepherd. Ricky is Pape's third dog since joining the working dog unit here about a year ago.

The play, of course, is business—serious business. The dog handler's life is on the line in the strong bond of trust in the working dog's ability and dedication on the job. The play is

always somehow a part of incessant training or performing whenever the dogs are out of the kennel.

Airmen in the canine unit here perform sweeps for explosives or drugs, along with patrol work around the base. The dogs assist in "direct apprehension" of people and also perform "overwatch," being as a second security forces entity, watching and protecting the human during apprehension of a suspect or detainee.

The dog teams also are deployed as much as nine months out of 12 to locations near and far, nationwide or overseas. The teams also assist local agencies when needed. Teams from Kirtland AFB have worked with Secret Service members during visits by presidents and vice presidents, have done explosives sweeps at public buildings in the community and in 24-hour rotations at entry gates here as a result of 2001 terrorist attacks that heightened security on Air Force bases everywhere and supported military operations during the recent war in the Middle East.

Helms and his dog, seven-year-old Cezar, returned last July from deployment to Kuwait. The deployment was Helms' first with a working dog but his second deployment "to the desert." Pape has also deployed once with a dog to Southwest Asia; he has deployed three times while serving in the military.

Between regular duty here and deployments, the handlers and their dogs do a bit of public relations. The dogs are crowd pleasers as they are put through their paces in demonstrations for events like the 58th Special Operations Wing's Career Day for students and past Independence Day events on the base. Our military dog handlers have pride in their canine partners' abilities and accomplishments during the demonstrations of the dogs' for the military and the nation.

While deploying with a dog might sound like a greater load of responsibility than deploying alone, both handlers stress that the proper food, shelter and care are always a priority for the animals. In fact, both handlers say the dogs have assurance of comfort and care that exceeds what the handlers are likely to be provided. Focus is primarily on ensuring the dogs are able to perform their dangerous tasks.

Some working dogs are "dual certified," for patrol work and for either drug searches or explosives detection. Cezar and Ricky both detect explosives and have patrolled with their handlers as part of one of three teams in three flights that rotate on duty to maintain 24-hour security.

While traveling when deployed, the handlers and their dogs may take military and civilian transportation between locations. Traveling military, the handlers said, means the handlers are in uniform and their dogs are kenneled in the aircraft. But in civilian flights, the handlers wear civilian clothing and their dogs stay with them. Their dogs are classified as "service dogs," allowing them to stay with the handlers just as dogs are that serve people with disabilities.

"I'm in civilian clothes, but my dog wears a badge around his neck," Pape explained.

The dog with a badge invites the curiosity of the public who ask numerous questions. Many of those people are youngsters who might someday choose the same career as Helms and Pape.

"I do have a lot of people come up to me (and) they ask 'what kind of dog is that, what do you do' and I tell them I'm in the military and he's a police dog just like I'm a cop," Pape said. "I kind of enjoy it...I tell them I'm in the military and what branch. They just thank me for doing what I do, especially now with all that's happened in the world, Sept. 11 and the recent war."

Both handlers are fervent in their appreciation of their canine partners.

"A lot of people say 'oh, they're just a dog,'" Pape said. But during deployment, he frequently found himself walking the desert, talking to his partner.

"We don't look at our dogs as dogs," he added. "They have a personality. I joke about Ricky being my partner and best friend when I'm out working. These dogs will devote their lives just to save me and they love doing their job."

RIGHT—Security Forces Military Working Dogs handlers Senior Airman Garrett Pape, left, and Staff Sgt. John Helms, right, with their canine partners Ricky, left, and Cezar, right, gang up on Staff Sgt. Devon F. Witt during a lighter moment of practice.



LEFT—Staff Sgt. Devon F. Witt plays the "bad guy" for Military Working Dog Ricky's apprehension practice.

RIGHT—Military Working Dog Ricky charges after his human partner's "escaping criminal."

BELOW—Staff Sgt. Devon F. Witt runs from apprehension while Military Working Dog Ricky ends his chance to escape in a mock apprehension.



Senior Airman Garrett Pape and Military Working Dog Ricky practice jumping onto a low wall and racing along it in a mock patrol.

